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SUBJECT: RUSSIA - GEORGIA: NO PEACE ON PEACEKEEPING FORCES

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) The GOR reacted angrily to the June 17 incident in Abkhazia involving Russian peacekeepers, calling it another senseless "provocation" by the GOG. In a short and curt exchange, MFA CIS Fourth Department Deputy Director Tarabrin told us that the Russian peacekeepers were engaged in a "routine" activity --transporting ammunition stored in the Gali district to Urta, in the Zugdidi district when they were seized and detained for two hours by the GOG. Per Tarabrin, this kind of routine operation did not require the prior notification that the Georgians demanded. Tarabrin saw in the incident the continuation of an established pattern: any positive trend in the bilateral relationship is spoiled by a well-planned provocation. Tarabrin thought the June 7 Medvedev-Saakashvili meeting in St. Petersburg had opened a new chapter, with Medvedev proposing a more substantive summit within six weeks. The June 17 "provocation" suggested that some in the GOG did not want to see a thaw. Judging from the group of journalists "ready to go," at the scene, Tarabrin charged that the event had been orchestrated, just like the recent bus shooting in Gali. "Is this a comedy or a tragedy?" Tarabrin asked.

¶2. (SBU) While Tarabrin would not be drawn out on the nature of the ammunition seized, in a June 18 statement, the Russian Defense Ministry said the twenty anti-tank missiles belonged to an anti-tank unit of a motorized rifle battalion of peacekeeping forces deployed in the Zugdidi district. The MOD statement noted that both Georgia and Abkhazia continue to keep tank units. The Russian Defense Ministry demanded that "the vehicle and the ammunition which were seized in a brigand-like manner, be returned to the peacekeepers."

¶3. (U) In its June 17 statement, the MFA continued to place the onus for the deterioration in relations on Georgia. The GOR noted the Georgian late May request through the CIS for consultations no later than the end of July about a change in the format and mandate of the CIS Peacekeepers. Contrary to GOG allegations that Russia was no longer neutral in the conflict, the MFA argued, the GOR had proved in many international fora, most recently in the OSCE, that it was Georgia which had violated the Moscow Agreement, while Russian PKOs have kept the peace. The statement referred to Saakashvili's Rustavi interview, where he had said that thirty days after sending the notification to the CIS, the GOG could ask for the withdrawal of the Russian peacekeepers, and warned that any such request would "de-ice" the conflict and cause instability throughout the Caucasus.

¶4. (C) In a June 18 meeting, Federation Council Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Mikhail Margelov did not respond concretely to Deputy Assistant Secretary Merkel's query about the June 17 incident in Abkhazia. Instead, he maintained that the key to the conflict with Abkhazia lay in finding a "common economic language." The GOR, Margelov said, was intent on ensuring peace on its border before the 2014 Sochi Olympics. Margelov noted that Medvedev and Saakashvili had a "good meeting" at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum.

Margelov thought that positive initial encounter could pave the way for a more productive Russian - Georgian conversation. The only possible stumbling block, Margelov thought, would be if the GOG were to think that Abkhazia was "slipping away" and were to do "something stupid."

¶5. (C) Comment: Russia will adopt a strictly legalistic interpretation of the June 17 events and likely will paint Georgia's treatment of the PKO forces as a violation of the Moscow Agreement. Regardless of whether this is convincing internationally, Russian elite and public opinion will harden further.

RUSSELL